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Place Marketing or Civic Information? Classifying Municipal Tweets using Machine Learning

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Abstract

How do municipalities use social media? For place marketing, civic information, or dialogue with citizens? We address this question by classifying 35,930 tweets from 15 municipal Twitter accounts in the Skåne region of Sweden, using a machine learning algorithm trained on manually annotated data. Tweets are classified along two dimensions: whether they contain place marketing content and whether they contain civic information, yielding four categories. Our findings show that place marketing content declined substantially over the period studied, from nearly 40 percent of tweets in 2009 to just above 20 percent in 2018. In contrast, civic information and direct dialogue with citizens increased. These results suggest that the rise of social media has not trapped municipalities in a zero-sum place marketing arms race. Instead, municipalities appeared to be using Twitter increasingly as a channel for civic communication, with implications for how scholars and practitioners understand the evolving role of social media in place branding.

Keywords: place marketing; place branding; social media; municipalities; machine learning; Twitter; Sweden

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1 Introduction

Cities, regions and countries around the world are increasingly engaged in place marketing to attract capital and foster growth. The phenomenon is not new: already [Harvey \(1989\)](#) noted that cities were adopting extrovert strategies for growth, involving “the construction of all sorts of lures to bring capital into town” (p. 10). The subsequent decades have seen a large and growing research literature examining the goals, methods and consequences of place marketing and place branding ([Vuignier, 2017](#); [Lucarelli and Berg, 2011](#)). More recently, the rise of social media has provided new avenues for place marketing - but also new possibilities for civic communication. Research on how public bodies actually use social media remains limited, and dominated by small-sample or qualitative studies ([Sevin, 2016](#); [Norström and Hattinger, 2016](#)).

This paper asks: how do municipalities use social media? Is it primarily for place marketing, or for other purposes such as providing civic information and engaging in dialogue with citizens? We address this question empirically by classifying 35,930 tweets from 15 municipal Twitter accounts in Skåne, the southernmost region of Sweden. Ending before the pandemic and before Twitter was sold to Elon Musk, the tweets span the period from 2009 to 2019 and are classified using a machine learning algorithm trained on manually annotated data. Tweets are categorized along two dimensions - place marketing content and civic information content - yielding four categories: pure place marketing, pure civic information, both, and a residual category dominated by dialogue with citizens.

Our analysis shows that place marketing content declined substantially over the study period, from nearly 40 percent of tweets in 2009 to just above 20 percent in 2018. Meanwhile, both civic information and dialogue with citizens increased. The rise of Twitter has not, it appears, trapped municipalities in a zero-sum marketing arms race where all compete to project the most attractive image. Instead, municipalities appear to be gradually discovering and utilizing social media as a channel for genuine civic communication.

The paper makes three contributions. First, we contribute to the theoretical discussion of whether municipal social media use is best understood as a social dilemma, where competitive pressure forces all municipalities to engage in marketing at the expense of substantive communication, or as an opportunity for value-adding civic engagement. Our empirical findings support the latter interpretation, at least in the Swedish context.

Second, we provide, to our knowledge, one of the first large-N studies of the content of municipal social media communication. Several reviews of the place branding literature have called for such studies. [Vuignier \(2017\)](#), after a multi-disciplinary literature review covering 1976–2016, concluded that the field suffered from a lack of conceptual clarity and scant

empirical evidence. [Niedomysl and Jonasson \(2012\)](#) and [Lucarelli and Berg \(2011\)](#) raised similar concerns, particularly regarding the absence of systematic, quantitative analyses.

Third, we introduce machine learning classification as a tool for analyzing place-related communication at scale. While machine learning is increasingly used in the social sciences, applications to the study of place branding remain rare, though interest is growing ([Taecharungroj and Pattaratanakun, 2025](#); [Lucarelli et al., 2024](#)). The approach allows researchers to classify large corpora of text without relying entirely on manual coding, opening up new possibilities for the field.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews related research on municipal social media use and develops the two theoretical scenarios that frame our analysis. Section 3 provides institutional background on Swedish municipalities. Section 4 describes the data and methods. Section 5 presents the results, and Section 6 discusses their implications.

2 Literature review

2.1 Place marketing and social media

Following [Niedomysl and Jonasson \(2012\)](#) and [Gold and Ward \(1994\)](#), we define place marketing as “the measures taken, by actors appointed to govern a place, to improve the competitive image of that place.” [Niedomysl and Jonasson \(2012\)](#) add that such measures are typically aimed at attracting capital from elsewhere, though the actual goals may vary and are difficult to identify from the content of communication alone.

The emergence of social media has generated considerable interest in how public bodies use platforms such as Twitter for place branding purposes. [Sevin \(2016\)](#) studied the content shared by three local governments—Cape Town, Philadelphia and Myrtle Beach—by analyzing the most recent 3,200 tweets from each city’s official Twitter account. Using frequency counts of terms, Sevin concluded that the cities were primarily interested in building an audience that subscribes to updates, rather than engaging in genuine two-way conversation. This finding echoes earlier work by [Sevin \(2011\)](#), who noted that municipal Twitter accounts tend not to make use of the platform’s interpersonal communication and networking capabilities. [Efe \(2013\)](#) further observed that destination marketing projects tend to use Twitter predominantly to share information about festivals, concerts, fairs and other events.

In a Swedish context, [Norström and Hattinger \(2016\)](#) conducted an interview study with communicators in three municipalities and found that social media was primarily used to promote one-way communication of content not generally intended to change perceptions within the target audience. Tensions emerging in the use of social media resulted in hesi-

tation, uncertainty and a slowing down of work practice. Communicators mentioned both providing civic information and promoting the municipality as goals. As one communicator put it: “It’s about showing the municipality from its best side to make citizens feel proud [...] It’s about external communication and a little bit of marketing.”

In the field of tourism—closely related to place branding—[Ketter and Avraham \(2012\)](#) conducted a qualitative content analysis of ten online place marketing campaigns and concluded that social media blurs the distinction between source, message and receiver, as users gain power and take an active role in the creation and distribution of campaign messages. This observation points to the transformative potential of social media: it need not merely replicate traditional marketing, but can fundamentally alter how places communicate with their publics.

More recent work has deepened our understanding of how public actors operate in digital environments. [Lucarelli et al. \(2024\)](#) examine how different public actors contribute to shaping “brand publics” on social media, showing that digitalization can challenge the traditional public–private dichotomy in how municipalities, regions and cities construct their brands online. Their approach highlights that public actors—including municipalities—are not merely broadcasting marketing messages but are participating in networked processes of brand constitution that involve multiple stakeholders. In a related vein, [Asdourian et al. \(2026\)](#) analyze the digital visibility of cities and regions on Twitter in relation to sustainability narratives, demonstrating that municipal communication on social media extends well beyond traditional place marketing into substantive policy domains. These studies suggest that the content of municipal social media communication is more diverse than early accounts assumed, but neither provides a systematic longitudinal classification of the full range of content that municipalities produce—a gap the present study aims to fill.

An important conceptual development is the argument by [Potapovs \(2024\)](#) that place branding should be understood not merely as a marketing activity but as a form of public policy, with implications for how it is governed, evaluated and held accountable. This framing is particularly relevant for municipal social media use, where the communicating actor is a democratically elected government body with obligations that extend far beyond image management.

2.2 Two theoretical scenarios

Based on previous research, we distinguish two scenarios for how the rise of social media may affect municipal communication.

2.2.1 The social dilemma scenario

In the first scenario, municipal social media use is understood as a social dilemma. Municipalities feel compelled to be active on Twitter because they expect other municipalities to be active, creating competitive pressure to project an attractive image. This logic echoes longstanding concerns about marketing more generally. [Gordon \(1974\)](#) provided a critical account of advertising in which the struggle for attention produces information noise rather than useful content. [Shubik and Levitan \(1980\)](#) analyzed the economics of advertising and noted that its effects can be decomposed into a component that benefits the industry as a whole and a component that benefits one firm at the expense of its competitors.

Applied to the municipal context, this means that place marketing may partly benefit local government as a whole—for example, by increasing citizen awareness of available services—but partly represents a zero-sum competition between municipalities for citizens and taxpayers. It is, after all, impossible to increase the total demand for municipalities: each citizen pays taxes in one municipality only. Some scholars have expressed concern that spending on place marketing may come at the expense of substantive social policies ([Harvey, 1989](#); [Crilley, 1993](#)), or that it may be used to legitimize activities that “entertain” the public to avert attention from local social problems ([Häussermann and Colomb, 2003](#); [Hubbard, 1995](#)).

In this scenario, the prediction is that place marketing should be a dominant or increasing category of municipal tweeting, as competitive pressure drives municipalities toward more marketing-oriented communication.

2.2.2 The civic communication scenario

In the second scenario, social media enables municipalities to engage in genuinely value-adding communication with citizens. [Efe \(2013\)](#) and [Solis and Breakenridge \(2009\)](#) have emphasized that the importance of social media lies in its potential for direct communication with target audiences. [Ketter and Avraham \(2012\)](#) noted that social media can turn passive web users into active participants. Through these channels, municipalities may find new ways to inform citizens about local matters and engage in dialogue.

This scenario draws on the broader insight that people are not doomed to be trapped in sub-optimal equilibria of social dilemmas ([Dawes, 1980](#)). In strategic situations that are repeated over time, with good conditions for learning and the evolution of mutual trust, cooperation can emerge. In the municipal context, this would manifest as a shift away from purely marketing-oriented communication toward content that informs, engages and responds to citizens.

Recent work in *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* has increasingly emphasized the

importance of stakeholder participation in place branding processes. [Ripoll González et al. \(2025\)](#) argue that managing stakeholder involvement requires active network management rather than top-down control, while [Källström and Ripoll González \(2025\)](#) conceptually explore the different roles that actors—including residents—adopt in place branding processes and how these relate to brand citizenship behavior. In a Swedish case study, [Källström and Siljeklint \(2024\)](#) document how stakeholder engagement shaped the rebranding of Kristianstad. These contributions underscore that effective place branding increasingly depends on genuine dialogue rather than one-way projection.

The prediction under this scenario is that civic information and dialogue should be increasing categories of municipal tweeting, while the share of pure place marketing should be stable or declining. [Braun et al. \(2013\)](#) provide further motivation for this expectation, noting that “residents are largely neglected by place branding practice and their priorities are often misunderstood, even though they are not passive beneficiaries but are active partners and co-producers of public goods, services and policies.”

To adjudicate between these scenarios, we need to examine the actual content of municipal social media communication—at scale and over time. This is what the present study aims to do.

3 Institutional background

Swedish municipalities provide an instructive setting for studying public communication. Sweden has 290 municipalities, of which 33 are located in Skåne, the southernmost region. Swedish municipalities enjoy high levels of political autonomy and manage large amounts of public resources. They are responsible for roughly 60 percent of public employment in Sweden and hold sole responsibility for key welfare services including schooling, child care and elder care, all of which are fully or mainly tax-financed. Municipalities also handle zoning issues (including building permits and alcohol licensing), culture and public transport. Municipal public consumption amounts to approximately 20 percent of GDP, compared to 7 percent for central government ([Bergh et al., 2017](#)).

The combination of political autonomy and fiscal weight makes Swedish municipalities important actors in their own right, with both the resources and the incentives to engage in place marketing. At the same time, their extensive welfare responsibilities give them substantial amounts of substantive information to communicate to citizens.

Sweden’s capital Stockholm started an official Twitter account in August 2008. The second and third largest cities joined in 2009, as did most of the municipalities in our sample. Social media adoption by municipalities was thus relatively rapid, and by August 2019, 15

of the 33 Scanian municipalities maintained an official Twitter account—these form the basis of our study.

4 Data and methods

4.1 Data

We downloaded all tweets from the official Twitter accounts of the 15 Scanian municipalities that had such an account as of August 2019, yielding a dataset of 35,930 original tweets (retweets excluded). The data spans from 2009, when most municipalities in the sample started their accounts, to 2019.

Tweets were classified along two dimensions: whether they contain civic information and whether they contain place marketing content. This two-dimensional scheme means that each tweet falls into one of four categories: pure civic information, pure place marketing, tweets containing both, and a residual category. In practice, the residual category is dominated by dialogue between the municipality and its citizens—for example, replies to questions about municipal services.

Table 1 displays one example tweet for each of the four categories.

Table 1: Examples of tweet classification

Example	Label	Code
<user> tackar! Härligt att du uppskattar det :) /Linda	Other	[0,0]
Svårt att ringa kommunen: Just nu är det probelm att ringa in till kommunens växelnummer 0410-73 30 00. Efter en... <url>	Information	[1,0]
Hyllie blir global förebild <url>	Place marketing	[0,1]
Högsta möjliga keditbetyg för <kommun> kommun: Kred- itvärderingsinstitutet Standard & Poor´s ger <kommun>s kommun AAA/A-1+... <url>	Information and place marketing	[1,1]

4.2 Classification method

To classify the full set of tweets, we employed a supervised machine learning approach. We began by manually annotating a random sample of 469 tweets. In a subsequent active learning step, an additional 147 tweets—specifically those that the initial model found hardest to classify—were annotated manually, with the model being updated continuously. The total set of manually classified tweets thus comprises 616 observations.

The classification model is inspired by the classical Naive Bayes approach but uses pre-trained word vectors rather than simple word counts to represent text. Developed by [Moricz \(2019\)](#), Swedish-language word vectors, trained on Swedish Twitter data, were used to represent each word as a 300-dimensional vector. This approach captures synonymy and semantic similarity in a data-driven fashion, which is especially valuable for a language like Swedish where freely available linguistic resources (such as stop-word lists and high-quality stemmers) are less developed than for English. Table 2 illustrates how the word vector representation captures semantic relationships between words.

Table 2: Examples of synonym representation with word vectors

idé		utställning	
Synonyms	Cosine distance	Synonyms	Cosine distance
ide	0.66	utställningen	0.85
idè	0.60	fotoutställning	0.79
affärsidé	0.60	vernissage	0.74
grej	0.58	konstutställning	0.71
idén	0.56	utställningar	0.69
id'e	0.54	galleri	0.67

To prevent the model from learning municipality-specific patterns rather than content-based patterns, we preprocessed the tweets by replacing municipality names, URLs, user names, and hashtags with generic tokens. Local markers such as event names (e.g., “Malmöfestivalen”) were similarly replaced with generic terms.

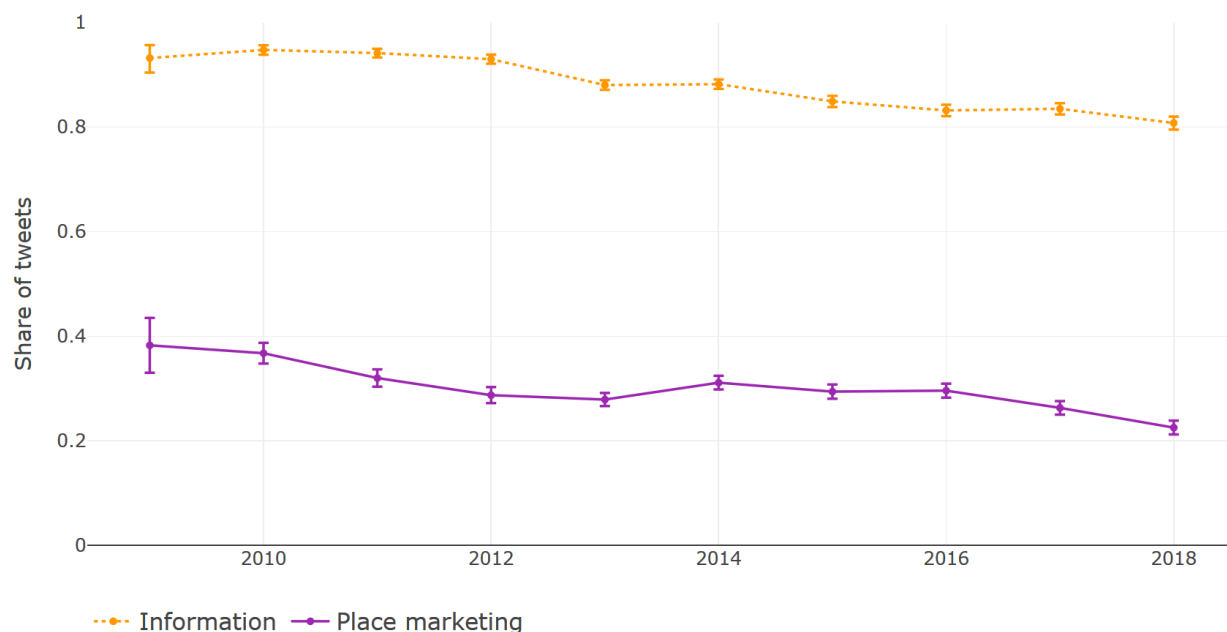
Sentences were represented by concatenating the word vectors of up to 35 words. The model was trained separately for each dimension (information and place marketing) by minimizing a weighted mean-square-error loss function using stochastic gradient descent. Class weights were set to the inverse of class priors to account for class imbalance. Further technical details on the model specification are provided in the Appendix.

5 Results

5.1 Overall trends

Figure 1 displays the share of tweets classified as containing civic information and the share classified as containing place marketing, using the dichotomous (two-dimensional) measure. Since a tweet can be classified as containing both information and marketing, the two series do not sum to one.

Figure 1: Share of tweets containing civic information and place marketing (dichotomous measure)

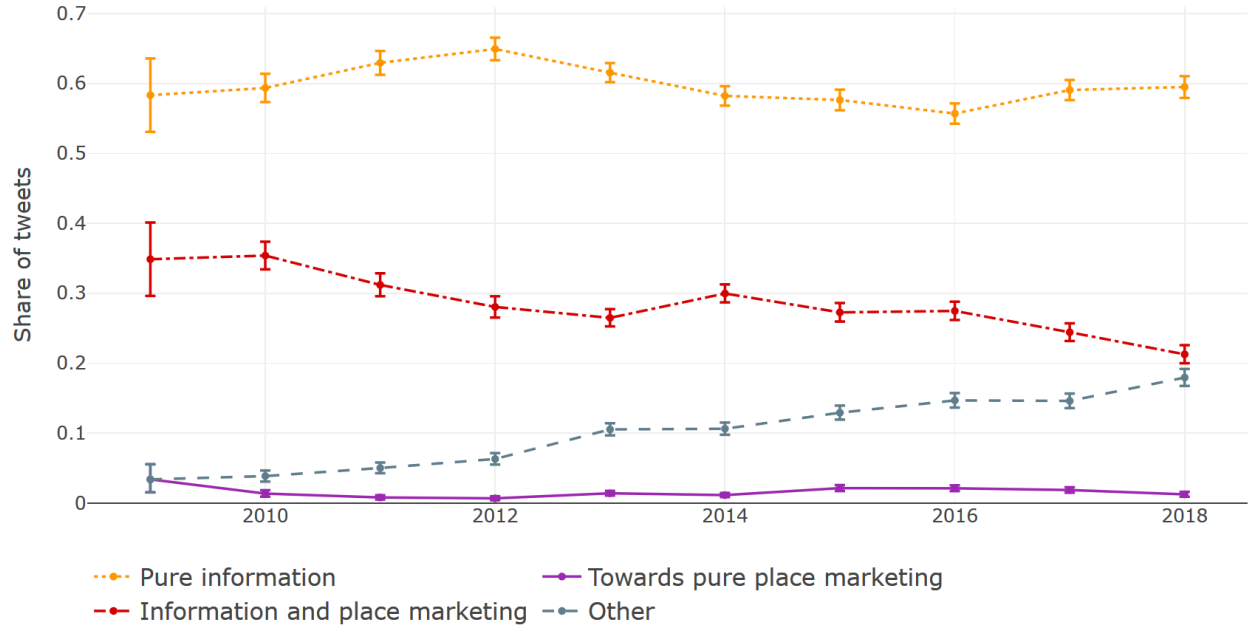


Note: A tweet can contain both civic information and place marketing and thus appear in both series. Appendix Figure 4 shows the corresponding counts.

The figure reveals a clear divergence over time. The share of tweets with place marketing content declined substantially, falling from nearly 40 percent in the early years of municipal tweeting to just above 20 percent by 2018. The share containing civic information, by contrast, increased over the same period. This pattern is consistent with the civic communication scenario outlined in Section 2: rather than escalating their marketing efforts in response to competitive pressure, municipalities appear to have shifted toward more informational content over time.

Figure 2 provides a complementary view using the four mutually exclusive categories. Here, each tweet is assigned to exactly one category, and the shares sum to one.

Figure 2: Tweet categories over time (four mutually exclusive categories)



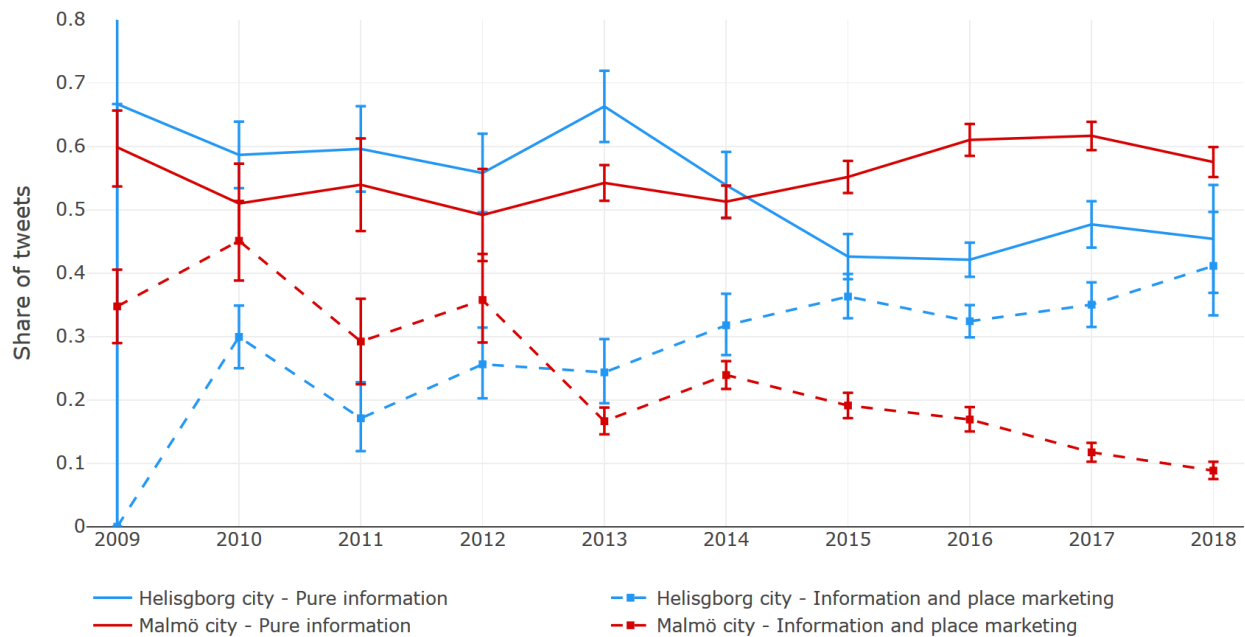
Note: Each tweet is classified into one category only; shares sum to one. Appendix Figure 5 shows the corresponding counts.

The four-category breakdown reinforces the main finding. The category of pure place marketing—tweets that contain marketing content but no civic information—declined markedly over time. The category combining both information and marketing also appears to have decreased somewhat. Meanwhile, the shares of pure civic information and of dialogue (the residual category) both grew. The rising share of dialogue is particularly noteworthy: it suggests that municipalities are increasingly using Twitter not just to broadcast information, but to interact with citizens directly.

5.2 Variation across municipalities

Figure 3 illustrates the variation in tweeting behavior across municipalities, using Helsingborg and Malmö—the two largest cities in Skåne after the regional capital—as examples.

Figure 3: Variation in municipal Twitter behavior: Helsingborg and Malmö



Note: Two of four categories are displayed for readability.

The comparison reveals that while the aggregate trend applies broadly, there is notable variation in both the level and trajectory of different types of content across municipalities. This variation suggests that municipal tweeting behavior is not purely driven by external competitive pressure—if it were, we would expect greater convergence—but is shaped by local decisions about how to use the platform.

6 Discussion and conclusions

This paper set out to examine whether municipal social media use is best understood as a social dilemma that traps municipalities in an escalating place marketing competition, or as an opportunity for civic communication and dialogue. Using machine learning to classify nearly 36,000 tweets from 15 Swedish municipalities over a decade, we find clear support for the latter interpretation. Place marketing content has declined as a share of municipal tweeting, while both civic information and dialogue with citizens have increased.

6.1 Implications for theory

Our findings speak directly to the tension identified in the literature between marketing-oriented and communication-oriented uses of social media by public bodies. The social dilemma framework, which would predict an escalation of marketing content as municipalities compete for attention, does not find support in our data. Instead, the pattern is more consistent with a learning process in which municipalities—over time and through repeated interaction—discover that social media is more effectively used as a tool for informing and engaging citizens than for projecting a polished image.

This result resonates with the broader theoretical insight that social dilemmas need not result in sub-optimal equilibria when the strategic interaction is repeated and conditions for learning are favorable (Dawes, 1980). Swedish municipalities interact regularly, observe one another’s strategies, and operate within a culture of transparency and public accountability, which may facilitate cooperative outcomes.

It is worth noting, however, that the decline in place marketing content does not mean that municipalities have abandoned image management entirely. Even at the end of our study period, roughly one in five tweets contained place marketing content. The shift is thus one of emphasis rather than abandonment.

6.2 Implications for practice

Our findings carry several implications for practitioners involved in municipal communication and place branding.

First, the results suggest that a pure marketing approach to municipal social media may be unnecessary and potentially counterproductive. The trend toward more informational and dialogic content indicates that municipalities have found—whether through deliberate strategy or trial and error—that citizens value substantive communication. Practitioners may take note that building a genuine relationship with residents through information and dialogue can coexist with, and perhaps even support, place branding objectives.

Second, the increasing share of dialogue in municipal tweeting is encouraging from a democratic perspective. As Braun et al. (2013) have noted, residents are active partners and co-producers of public services, yet they are often neglected in place branding practice. Recent work by Källström and Ripoll González (2025) and Ripoll González et al. (2025) has further emphasized that genuine stakeholder participation strengthens citizenship, enhances democratic legitimacy and increases the effectiveness of place branding. Our findings suggest that—at least on Twitter—Swedish municipalities are moving toward a more inclusive and participatory model of communication, consistent with these normative prescriptions. This

aligns with the argument by [Potapovs \(2024\)](#) that place branding is best understood as a public policy activity, subject to the same standards of accountability and citizen orientation as other policy domains.

Third, the variation across municipalities in [Figure 3](#) indicates that there is no single “best” approach. Different municipalities appear to have adopted different communication strategies, suggesting that local context, organizational capacity and communication culture all play a role. Practitioners should be cautious about adopting one-size-fits-all prescriptions.

6.3 Methodological contribution

This paper demonstrates that machine learning classification can be a productive tool for studying place branding and communication at scale. The approach allows researchers to move beyond small-sample qualitative studies—valuable as they are for generating insights—toward systematic analysis of large text corpora. As [Sevin \(2016\)](#) has emphasized, local governments now create and distribute content at relatively low cost, generating large volumes of text data that are amenable to computational analysis. Machine learning classification, trained on expert-annotated samples, provides a principled way to analyze this data while maintaining the conceptual distinctions that matter to the field. The growing interest in machine learning within the place branding literature is illustrated by [Taecharungroj and Pattaratanakun \(2025\)](#), who use machine learning to predict economic performance from soft power and nation brand indicators—a methodological parallel that underscores the potential of computational approaches in this field.

6.4 Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be noted. First, our data come from one Swedish region, and Sweden’s political culture—characterized by transparency, strong local government and a comprehensive welfare state—may make our findings less generalizable to other national contexts. Replication in other settings would be valuable.

Second, our classification captures the content of tweets but not their reception. We do not know how citizens perceive or respond to different types of municipal tweets. Future research could link tweet content to engagement metrics (likes, retweets, replies) or to survey data on citizen perceptions.

Third, the study period ends in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have substantially affected how municipalities use social media. It also predates the significant changes to the Twitter platform itself. Whether the trends we document have continued, accelerated or reversed in the post-pandemic period is an open question.

Fourth, while our machine learning approach allows us to analyze a much larger corpus than would be feasible with purely manual coding, it necessarily involves some classification error. We have taken steps to mitigate this—including active learning and careful preprocessing—but the approach is not perfectly accurate.

Despite these limitations, our findings provide evidence that the rise of social media has not, in the Swedish case, led to a race to the bottom in municipal communication. On the contrary, there is room for cautious optimism regarding how social media is reshaping the relationship between municipalities and their citizens.

Appendix

A1. Technical details of the classification model

We train a classification model separately for each of the two dimensions (civic information and place marketing). The model is inspired by the Naive Bayes approach but replaces word-count vectors with concatenated pre-trained word vectors to exploit semantic similarity between words.

Each tweet is represented by truncating or padding to a length of 35 word vectors. Although Twitter changed the allowed character length from 140 to 280 around November 2017, the distribution of word counts per tweet remained similar before and after this change, so the 35-word limit does not differentially affect tweets from different periods.

The model minimizes a weighted mean-square-error (MSE) loss function for each dimension:

$$-\sum_i w_c(y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2 \quad (1)$$

where subscript i denotes observations, y denotes the true label, $\hat{y}$ the predicted label, and w_c denotes class weights that vary by class c . We set class weights to the inverse of the class prior from the training data to up-weight underrepresented classes. MSE was chosen over cross-entropy because weighting has limited effect on the latter.¹

The predicted label is modeled as:

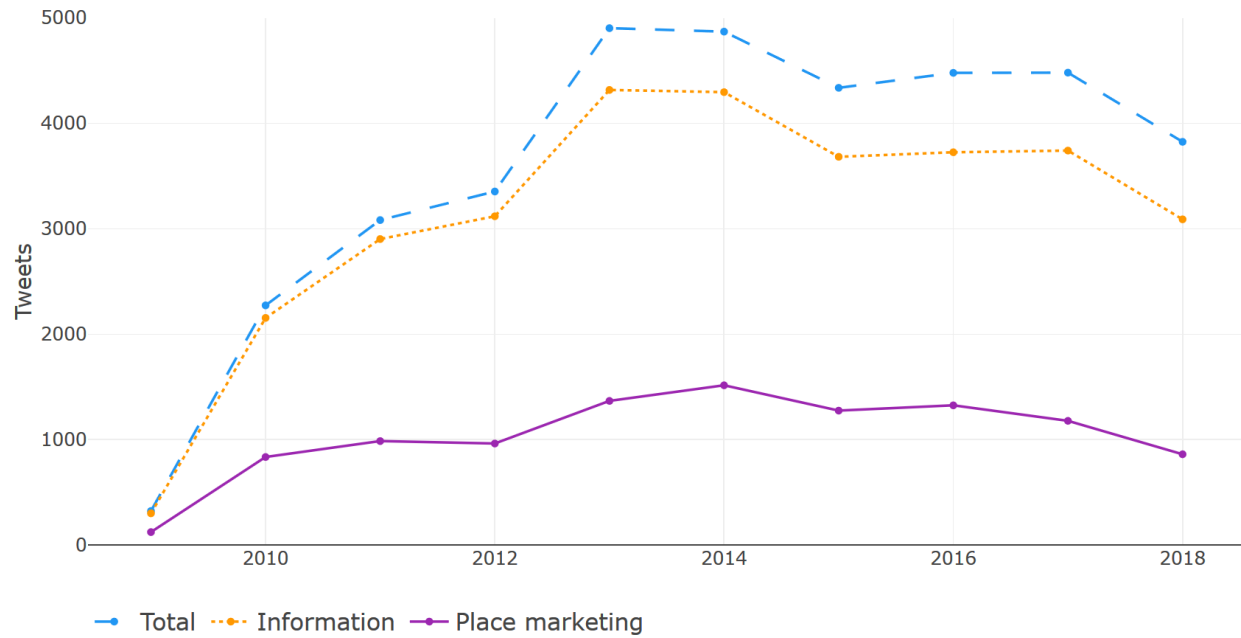
$$\hat{y} = c + \sum_{t=1}^T \sum_{d=1}^D b_{d,t} x_{d,t} \quad (2)$$

where $x_{d,t}$ represents the d -th dimension of word vector t in the sentence. The loss function is minimized using stochastic gradient descent, implemented in the neural network framework Keras. Given the low expressiveness of the model, the risk of overfitting is minimal and no hyperparameter tuning was performed.

¹The cross-entropy loss function $-\sum_i w_{c=1} y_i \log(\hat{y}_i) + w_{c=0} (1 - y_i) \log(1 - \hat{y}_i)$ penalizes classification errors heavily since the natural logarithm of zero tends to minus infinity, making class weighting less effective.

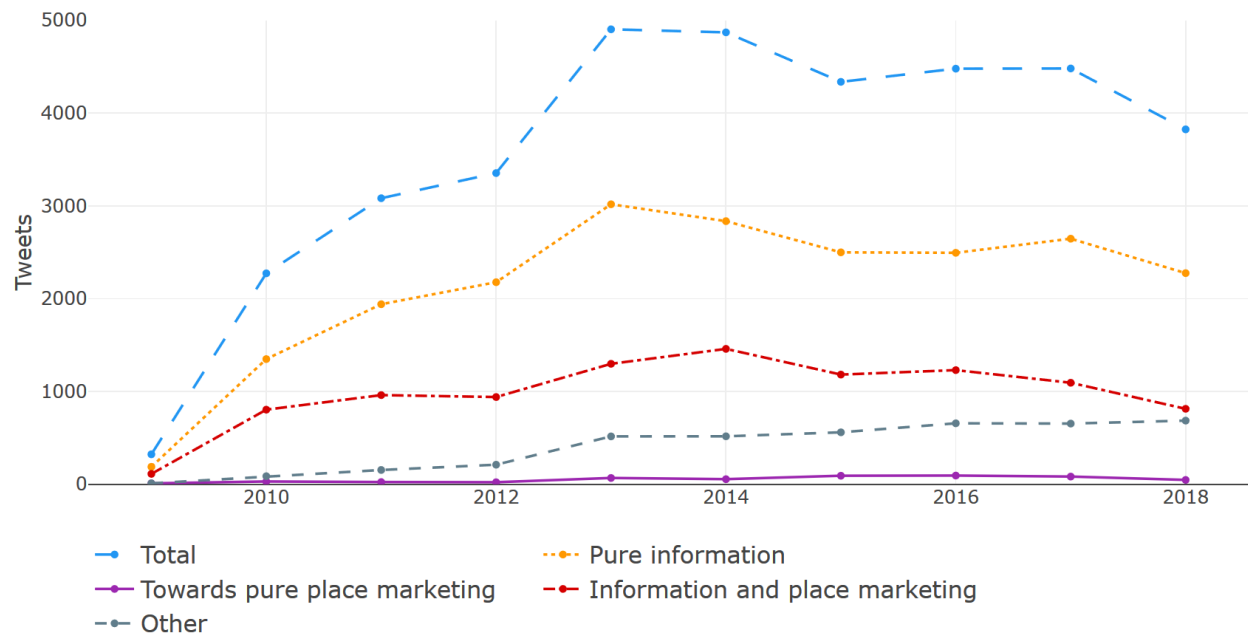
A2. Supplementary figures

Figure 4: Information and place marketing intent–dichotomous measure, counts



Note: A tweet can contain both civic information and place marketing and thus appear in both series.

Figure 5: Information and place marketing intent—four categories, counts



Note: Each tweet is classified into one category only.

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